

My Brother Made My Shirt (2004)

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The singing has not stopped

'Are My Hands Clean?'¹ chronicles the travels of a modern garment. reminding the wearer of all of those hands that formed the item, many for very little money, some died in the process, and as I speak the sequence of manipulation continues. The first time I heard this song by Sweet Honey in the Rock, it led me to question my relationship to clothing, how I rubbed the fabric between my fingers for quality, checked the straightness of cuffs, how flat a pocket lay against the surface, the regularity of pleats, the fold of a collar, and a host of other queries running through my mind. Not to mention the devising of strategies to negotiate price in an apparently hagggle-free economy. With racks of clothing face me, I was obliged to address the political power and social realities inherent in their manufacture.

Alienating the creation of clothes from the everyday, to the point of invisibility, makes it inconceivable for most people to imagine the purchase of fabric and fashioning an everyday item to wear, let alone that cloth itself started life somewhere, be it a cotton field or an oil well, we are approaching the tale of the spaghetti tree. This loss of relationship - making and using - profoundly affects the manner in which we view those that make our clothes. Headlines and bylines point out how clothes are made in sweat shops, that people who make our clothes are paid and treated like beggars, how globalisation has made slaves of the third world. The reports tell how children are forced into labour, and innocence is slaughtered on the altar of efficiency and profit, mainly profit.

While we bemoan the plight of people in foreign shores (and many within our own shores, as the film *Pretty Ugly Things* aptly depicts), we construct a picture of whole nations with runny eyes bent over machines. Conveniently this is accepted as the tribulations of the

¹ Sweet Honey In The Rock. 'Are My Hands Clean?' on [Live at Carnegie Hall](#) Cooking Vinyl, London 1988.